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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

COMMENT

CHRISTMAS AND WAR

THE Christmas of this year of grace will be the first of fifty-three to find the United States at war. Since the mournful Christmas of 1864—the last of Lincoln's first administration, the last he was to pass on earth—Santa Claus has had clean, white sledding for his pack of toys. No, I have not forgotten the Spanish-American flurry of war—it began in April and was over the tenth of December: peace was the nation's gift from the cheery saint, with Porto Rico and the Philippines for its stocking.

Now the gift we long for is victory, with the kaiser's crown for a bauble of price—the kaiser's crown, to be tossed over the fence by the German people and set in a museum by the republics. If the world can not longer exist half slave and half free, how long must we labor and fight to free ourselves and the world, to free ourselves that we may be worthy and able to free the world?

The arts must do what they can, not through preaching and propaganda—that is not their function—but through that freeing of the mind and lifting of the spirit which the perception of beauty brings. Thus do they spur men on to clear thought and keen action, to high and gallant endeavor; and the records they keep—the tale of the tribe they tell—may become an immortal possession of glory. Through beauty alone can men be inspired—the beauty of a command, an idea, a dream. Through the beauty of

art alone can their deeds resist time's slander; they must be forgotten unless art records them in stone or bronze, in color, or in the beaten gold of words.

The whole world is moved, as never before, to unities and enmities. War is now no isolated quarrel—all nations are aflame. Will the artists feel the universal emotion, so that a spirit of fire will leap from mind to mind and kindle the new era? Faith moves mountains still—will they believe in the new era, believe in their world? And will their world believe in them?—will it catch their flame as it flies?

Art must be powerful indeed, must be generous and devoted indeed, to match the prodigious energies now aroused. In the *Scientific American* for October 27th I read the epic of the motor truck which is to carry food and ammunition to our soldiers in France. Rival inventors, meeting in Washington, pooled their secrets, competing manufacturers pooled their plants; for all rivalries were forgotten, all competitions obliterated, in the common purpose—to make the best possible machine for the nation's need. The new motor for airplanes represents a similar union of energies, a similar devotion of individual genius to a common cause; the greatest experts in this inventive nation, men formerly rivals, locking themselves together through days and nights for the solution of a difficult problem.

Here we find men of science and business, men representing the keenest commercialism of a so-called "materialistic" age and country, all forgetting their battles and jealousies,

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forgetting profits, omitting from their plans both the ego and the dollar, thinking only of the best possible combination of brains for the best possible product, uniting their powers for a result more powerful than any individual could possibly have attained.

In the past the united arts have achieved results as wonderful; the Parthenon, the mediaeval cathedrals, the carved and painted churches of Italy, the Maya monuments of Yucatan, all represent an obliteration of rivalries, a union of individual energies, for the triumph of a common purpose. In these cases religion was the motive, or a combination of religion and patriotism; the motive becoming transfigured in the tribal mind to an ideal which only beauty could fitly serve. In the case of the truck and the motor we find, if not religion, a fundamental sense of brotherhood, of democratic tribal unity, expressing itself, if not in beauty, in something scarcely less noble—the fittest possible instrument of service.

When the motives of artists become once more united and spiritualized by a common emotion beyond individual profit or glory, we shall have great art to vie with the art of the past. We shall have it because individual power, the power of genius, will be reinforced, incalculably multiplied, by the reactions of sympathy; because the men of vision, magically stimulating each other, will create beauty beyond the dreams of any one of them. We shall have it because of the common will to eliminate waste—the waste of futile effort, despair, thwarted desire, suicidal agonies of body and

soul—which strews the paths of art with human wreckage. We shall have it because of a mystic force in the human will, a force compelling even in the individual unit, a force multiplied beyond mere numbers in the group, and overwhelmingly irresistible when the tribal will is aroused.

It is something like this that the Christmas of 1917 should bring to our poets and other artists, as they watch our young men going to war, or march along in the ranks. These boys in khaki, with complete simplicity and abandon, are giving themselves to a cause; by their union, by their courage and joy in it, they will make the cause irresistible. Do the men of vision feel a loosening of veils from their eyes, a falling of walls in their hearts, as they see the youth of the nation giving itself away? Do they see wider horizons, feel deeper loves? Do their spirits fuse together for heat and power in the great fire that is burning? Will they give us the miracle that they alone can give—the *beauty* of the new era that must come when war has burned away the old?

H. M.

AGAIN THE NEGRO

A very real Negro Samson came "into my mind" as I read Mr. Vachel Lindsay's *Negro Sermon* in the birthday number of POETRY; for in my ears awoke the strains of an old plantation melody, *Gawd's a-gwine t' move all de troubles away*, whose verses tell of Samson with all the artless familiarity of the true folk-singer. And then Mr. Lindsay's use of the phrase, *My Lord is riding high*, vividly